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ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

RESPONSE TO THE TRANSITION YEARS CONSULTATION DOCUMENT FROM THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON NATIVE EDUCATION ISSUES

May, 1991

THE ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

The ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION
represents 94 public boards of education of all sizes and
from all regions of the province which serve
over 1,700,000 students and adult learners.
OPSBA speaks for public education in Ontario
and represents the interests of public school trustees
to the government, the public and the media.

OPSBA SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON NATIVE EDUCATION ISSUES
SUBMISSION TO THE WORKGROUP ON
TRANSITION YEARS

The Special Committee on Native Education Issues is a Committee of the Ontario Public School Boards' Association. Established in 1990, its membership of six Native trustees is representative of OPSBA's regions. The Committee has developed a network of the Native Trustees appointed to school boards for the purpose of information sharing and it sponsors meetings and workshops for Native and non-Native trustees.

The Committee is acutely aware and concerned about the lack of success in education of Native students. Minister Marion Boyd has stated on many occasions that equal opportunity is not enough. Equity of outcomes is required. Studies have shown that, as a group, Native students are the least successful in terms of secondary school graduation of any group in Ontario. If we are to achieve equity of outcome, we need strenuous efforts by all those who share the responsibility for the education of our children. This will require leadership and accountability. We believe that leadership must come not only from Native organisations and school boards but also from the Ministry of Education. Unless the Ministry of Education makes clear that significant improvement in achievement by Native students is required and expected, that school boards and schools will be held accountable for progress, that the necessary resources and advisory services are made available, this long standing intractable problem will remain with us. This will be detriment to Native students and their communities but to society as a whole.

In this light, we regret that the Consultation Paper on the Transition Years makes very little mention of the depth of our concern about underachievement, choosing instead to set the context for change as living "in a society of rapid and pervasive changes". There is no mention of the plight of our children except a brief reference in a list of transition pilot projects.

We agree with the sentiments of Ronald Mackay and Lawrence Miles in their study <u>Native Student Dropouts in Ontario Schools</u>. It is time to stop the blaming and work on the solutions.

Our submission is not organised according to the framework set out in the Consultation Paper. We believe systemic and systematic approaches must be developed that will benefit all students. Native students during the transition years are usually educated in provincial schools where their numbers may be few or many, and they work and learn along side other students.

Current Concerns

1. General

Many native students are at risk because of poverty, family unemployment, health problems, housing deficiencies. The following statistics are reported by Wayne Warry in Ontario's First People: Native Children found in Children, Families and Public Policy in the 1990's (Thompson Educational publishing, Inc, 1990, edited by L.C. Johnson and D. Barnhorst).

Mortality rates among Native 5-19 year olds are triple the national average. Native children are five times more likely than non-natives to die before they are 16 years. Native adolescents aged 10-14 commit suicide at a rate almost nine times the national average. Among 15-24 year olds, it is 5-7 times the national average. These data together with other indicators, lead Warry to conclude that "Native children (are) perhaps the single most disadvantaged group in Canadian society".

The study of Native Student Drop-outs in Ontario Schools (MOE, 1989) confirms that participation and completion rates in secondary schools are far too low.

We recommend that this report, together with others prepared by Native organisations be seriously studied by the workgroup on the Transition Years in order that policy options focus on improving school outcomes for Native children.

2. Transition

Grades 7, 8 and 9 are identified as the Transition Years. For many native students, these years include major disruptions to the continuity of education. Not only do our students change schools, they move to different educational jurisdictions and to different communities. In extreme cases, a student may receive education K-6 in a reserve school, go to a school with one board of education for grades 7-8, and to a high school in another school board. How can

children retain a sense of continuity or commitment in such circumstances? If such arrangements are to be maintained, then the schools and authorities responsible must begin to collaborate in the development of transition procedures designed to connect students and families to the schools being attended. What is the implication for the Transitions Years of situations where education in reserve schools continued to grade 8, with grade 9 being the transition to provincial schools?

We believe that more rapid progress could be made if model policies or practices were identified by the Ministry and made available to all school boards which are responsible for the education of students living on reserves.

3. **Tuition Agreements**

Education for students living on reserves but educated in provincial schools is purchased from school boards through tuition agreements. The OPSBA Special Committee on Native Education Issues has concerns that in some cases these agreements, in practice, do not provide equal access to all services by Native students. While tuition agreements and their appropriateness in light of our concerns must be studied further, we raise the issue in the context of the Transition Years because we believe that the experience of Native students from reserves, the requirement to pay for additional services, and certain school or board practices can contribute to Native students being treated differently from the resident pupils. We believe that Native students must enjoy a real sense of belonging to the school community. They cannot feel pride and commitment if they feel, or are treated, like outsiders.

4. Language Learning

The Special Committee believes that successful language learning - speaking, listening, reading and writing - is central to school success. Many Native students are at a severe disadvantage because of inadequate language skills when they enter the Transition Years. Again, we refer the Ministry workteam to the study of Native dropouts for further discussion of this topic. We are aware that part of the solution lies in significant improvement in the teaching of language in the early grades. To this end, we invite the Ministry of Education to investigate the interface between provincially and federally funded schools to determine whether better cooperation in areas of teacher training, pre-service and in-service, teacher recruitment and curriculum development might enhance the learning opportunities of students.

The matter of language development in Native students is complex. Issues related to first and second language learning must be addressed as well as the need for students to acquire the specific language of the school.

We recommend that the teaching and learning of language become a key and central focus of a core curriculum for the Transition Years.

5. Racism

Native students and their parents experience racism in the school system. Racism acts as a barrier to student success by contributing to a lack of development of self-esteem, lowered expectation of self, lowered expectation of students by others, and often an expectation of failure . We acknowledge that overt expressions of racism towards Native people may have declined, but the subtle, systemic discrimination that many experience may be even more damaging. We believe that as the government proceeds with its intention for boards to develop anti-racist policies and practices, the issue of racism against Native people must receive special focus. Native people are Canada's First Nations and have experienced all of the worst aspects of colonisation. Changing beliefs, attitudes and practices that have been prevalent for decades is no easy task.

We recommend that curricular objectives dealing with the dignity of all peoples, the positive valuing of human differences and the special place of First Nations be included in the core curriculum and teacher development for the Transition Years.

6. Extra Curricular and School Wide Activities

Many Native Students are bussed to schools on bussing schedules that do not often allow for students to participate in extra curricular activities before and after school. The Child at Risk studies of Dan Offord et al. have identified recreation as an important component of success for students at risk. We believe that the Transition Years policies should identify the importance of extra curricular activities to the education of adolescents and advise boards to adopt policies and practices which encourage all students to participate. The opportunities for participation that require involved students to find alternative transportation are not acceptable for Native students and may not be acceptable for any students who rely on bussing.

6. Availability of Teachers

Native students require teachers who are knowledgeable and committed to their success. In addition, they need to see and experience teachers who themselves are Native. Native communities are increasingly committed to the provision of fully qualified Native teachers. We urge the Transition Years workteam to include the need to address employment equity with affirmative action strategies for the training and recruitment of Native teachers. We believe that teaching should be presented as an important career option for successful secondary students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we believe that improving the school success of Native students must be a priority. We believe that some of the changes necessary to accomplish this objective are of potential benefit to all students, and therefore should be systematically addressed. Separate or add-on initiatives for Native students are likely to be far less effective than strategies designed to make schools places of genuine learning for all.

We welcome the opportunity to make this submission and appreciate that it is possible because of our membership in OPSBA. However, we wish to point out that the early indications of the Ministry of Education's desire for the participation of Native organisations, communities or representatives will not be realised without the provision of resources. Interested groups must receive copies of Consultation Papers in sufficient quantities for distribution to interested parties and funds are required to assist groups to attend meetings for the purpose of preparing responses. Without these, the Ministry of Education cannot expect the participation of our communities in your consultation processes.